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ABSTRACT

A code of conduct for qualitative field studies is necessary to identify standards of good work and to prevent or expose unethical behavior. The cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, wisdom, and courage apply to qualitative field research, but ethics also requires asking about the purpose of the research itself. The researcher must ask why the research is being done and whom will it benefit. The problem of ethics of qualitative field research hinges on the issue of honesty about the cosmological beliefs of researchers. Qualitative field research is ethnography, and as ethnography it attempts to describe and explain human group culture through the local culture. Qualitative field research is also empirical, and in this respect it proceeds like any other science. The difference is that the qualitative researcher strives to know the object of study personally and to be his or her own most important research instrument. Personal involvement in qualitative research is both a strength and a potential weakness, because with subjectivity comes the potential for abuse. Action research is the popular term for ethnography of education to change, manipulate, or give a voice to certain people and their cultures, but action research is not ethnography; it is political activism to right perceived wrongs and promote the researchers' beliefs. The abuse of ethnography to establish special beliefs as truth is the main issue for the ethics of qualitative field studies. The qualitative field researcher must be characterized by a child-like innocence, good manners, and a facile mind determined to know and understand other cultures. (SLD)

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ED 405 354

Who Knows What?

by
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The researcher striving for a truthful, historical perspective on human social behavior, will discover that good qualitative research is a slow, painful, and tentative process. Human society is a tremendous plurality of cultures with competing and evolving truths. The fundamental research question is always "What is really going on here?" The special question for the qualitative researcher is always "Who knows what?" It applies to the researcher as well as potential informants and participants. What is the truth for any segment of society is the special problem of ethics and the high road of ethical practice is a very difficult journey. The best antidote to unethical practice is a constructive skepticism toward oneself, others, fashionable ideas, and the research enterprise itself. A good sense of humor, especially about oneself, is essential.

A code of conduct for qualitative field studies is necessary to identify standards of good work and to prevent or expose unethical behavior. Ethics is such a code, a set of rules for deciding how good or bad an action is. Qualitative field research, like all behavior, must follow the four cardinal virtues of antiquity: prudence, justice, wisdom, and courage. The exercise of prudence entails humility and circumspection. Justice means here honest, respectful pursuit of truth. Wisdom is timely recollection and discerning use of knowledge. Courage is firmness of character, endurance, and moral strength to correct wrongdoing. Because the cardinal virtues apply to qualitative field research--and to all research--because they are fundamental conditions of any good human conduct, they apply to doing qualitative field research. But ethics also requires asking about the purpose of the research itself. The special question for researchers is: Why is this research being done and for whose benefit?

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First, the practice of qualitative field research must be honest. Honesty requires a researcher be fair and straightforward in his conduct. The special question for the qualitative researcher is always "Who knows what?" so I begin with myself. Some readers might think it strange or even inadmissible for a contributor to a work about educational research to write about himself, but the question "Who knows what?" requires me to do so. Every honest researcher must make an effort to know and acknowledge what values he brings to his work. I personally believe in the Judeo-Christian way of life, and, specifically, Catholicism. My parents and relatives (all of German ancestry and American since the mid-1800's), reared me in that Christian way of life. For me, it is good. Therefore, my ultimate purpose in doing research, as with my life in general, is to do the best that I can to follow the truth as revealed in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. However, my purpose is neither to proselytize nor to exalt myself, but rather to be honest with myself and with others about my research and my position on the ethics of qualitative field studies. Everyone who knows me knows that I am lax about religion and skeptical about Catholicism. So, like many American Catholics, I disagree with Church doctrine in some areas. And I commit wrongdoing, because I am not perfect. Yet I am Catholic and follow a Christian way of life. Those who know me well, also know that I fight for principles I believe in, accept responsibility for my failures, and hold everyone up to high standards. So what makes me different from the next person? My personal history, including that Catholic upbringing. I know that I will never be nor want to be somebody else. Contrary to popular sociology, my Catholicism has not burdened me with self-hatred or guilt. In fact, knowing and believing in a system of thought, such as Catholicism, can be a great asset for a field researcher. I myself probably have a better eye and ear for other beliefs than if I did not have my own. Knowing where I myself stand, I am forever curious about where others stand and why, especially, as their beliefs have implications for education.

The problem of ethics of qualitative field studies hinges on this issue of honesty about the cosmological beliefs of researchers. In a pluralistic society qualitative field researchers hold different beliefs and

have the right to hold them. There are theists, atheists, agnostics, and nihilists. Furthermore, over time, some researchers will change their views, while others do not, most of them not in a chameleon-like adaptation to fashion, but sincerely, as a matter of growing. Some qualitative field researchers are honest with themselves and their audiences about their beliefs, while others are not. And some researchers are unsure of personal, cosmological beliefs or express a low level commitment to them. Others have their views but are afraid to express them. Nothing menaces research more than the *covert* moral stance of qualitative field researchers, just as a researcher enhances his work by being open about his weltanschauung to himself and his readers.

Covertness is outright insidious when it serves to establish a Truth for all persons and all times, moral monism. The main effect is a generalized expectation to be politically correct. Editors of professional journals and books have an ethical obligation to present a rich variety of qualitative field studies. Discussion of culture and education must be open to various points of view.

Qualitative field research is ethnography. However, the term can mislead people, because researchers identify myriad branches of this science and quibble about who is qualified to define and use the term. If qualitative field researchers would say honestly and humbly what they actually do, the wars over words would seem silly at best. As long as we are talking about the study of human groups, qualitative field research and ethnography are the same thing.

Ethnography attempts to describe and explain human group behavior through the local culture. Culture is the group's characteristic set of beliefs, knowledge, and activities, with all the artifacts and records they accumulate as their beliefs evolve. Usually, a researcher studies one group in comparison with other groups or the larger society. Ideally the qualitative researcher personally collects data in the field, which requires gaining first-hand experience, becoming a participant in the society for a while.

Qualitative field study is empirical. It originates in or relies on factual information, observation, or direct experience, not just theoretical knowledge. In its methods, it blends planning with

improvisation to tackle a particular problem. It is systematic in following, previously tested and established procedure for collecting, categorizing, or analyzing data. It is improvising known data for clues to the as yet unknown. Over time techniques and instruments are adapted to the circumstances of the field study at hand. Commonly used techniques include experiments, interviews, observation, and participation. Instruments may be simple or sophisticated, paper and pencil, camera, tape recorder, camcorder, and computer, but the researcher's own skill at hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching is always important. Analysis of data begins when the researcher enters the field and continues until the investigation is ended. The continuous, critical analysis of data gives some assurance that the researcher is truly responding to the situation and not imposing his bias onto the facts or recording an event mindlessly. Key sources, items, and categories are examined from several different angles to verify data as facts and to add depth. The researcher collects data systematically until he deems the record complete.

So in many respects ethnography proceeds like any other science. For evidence and proof it relies on the scientific method, in which a problem is identified, relevant data are gathered, a hypothesis is formulated, and the hypothesis is empirically tested. But unlike the physical scientist who depends on instruments and experiments to measure something objectively, the qualitative researcher strives to know the object of study personally--*to be the sensor himself.* The researcher is his own most sensitive and important research instrument. Thus my openness about telling you who I am. Thus the importance of the field researcher's five senses. All investigations express personal commitments and acts of hope, because all knowledge is personal knowledge.[1] In addition, the thing studied is a person or a human social event. Unlike rocks, microbes, and monkeys, the people investigated can give their perceptions of themselves and their situation. There is no standardized measuring tool. Only by knowing and acknowledging personal, subjective factors can the researcher even hope to prevent

[1] M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 65.

them from tainting his perceptions, action, and work--even the very truth he pursues.

For the main purpose of ethnography is always to see these people afresh--for what they are--not what the researcher wants them to be. The researcher must have certain attributes, such as mental independence, and techniques, such as listening intently to a tough-minded critic, to prevent the qualitative researcher's values from hardening into biases or outright false explanations. The point of qualitative research, like the investigation itself, is not to change that culture but to discover what is really going on in it.

Personal involvement in qualitative research is thus not only a strength, but also a great weakness. With subjectivity comes the potential for abuse, because researchers may choose to see and report only what they want. It is especially fashionable these days for researchers to reject or ignore ethnography's dependence on empirical verification. The old saw, "fiction is truer than fact," has often turned into "fiction is better than fact," not merely because fiction is entertaining, but also because it persuades without reasoned cross-examination or verification. From the viewpoint of these researchers, quasi-scientific methods and even fantasy are legitimate practices. In their minds, perception is always contingent on an *a priori* hegemonic or theoretical reality anyway. Even the physical world is a socially constructed reality, and empiricism is even politically oppressive. Conclusions, they claim, merely reflect political consensus, not historical facts and verified cause-effect relationships. To understand real physical events, like a landslide or hurricane or lecture, they resort to metaphor mongering and reconstructed meaning. They brook no contradiction, accept no counter evidence, and reject replication as unnecessary on the grounds that things are continuously "emerging." For them, only ideology sanctions field studies. There is one Truth, the researcher knows It, finds evidence in the field of deviation from It, and takes action to make people and society conform to It.

Action research is the popular term for ethnography of education to change, manipulate, or give a "voice" to certain people and their cultures. Action researchers moan that classical ethnographers once

abused the natives with "white, male European values" (although the word *native* is naturally also tabu). In the name of egalitarianism, their ostensible purpose is to champion "Others." But not all others. By advocating action research, also known as liberation theology, these enlightened researchers lend their own voice to supposedly voiceless Others. The new purpose for ethnography is to tell the Story about self, Other, and history as will be revealed by ghosts from the past.

Action research is not ethnography. It is a political activism to right perceived wrongs, extinguish particular beliefs, and promote others--the researchers' own. Politics comes first in their choice of whom to listen to from the living and the dead, they refuse to acknowledge, much less recognize stories from many other people, such as authority figures *within* the society studied and people with values opposing the researcher's. If opponents' stories are included in a field study at all, it is only to ridicule and vilify them. Despite pretentious categories, like "critical theory," and the researchers' self-appointed status as "critical theorists," their approach has no place for criticism of *their* theory. They neither test hypotheses nor examine contradictory data. From their perspective, principles and methods of science are tools of the instituted law or normal views of a pre-postmodernist age. Curriculum and instruction, in preschool through the university, they think, should be the seed bed for social change. "Doing the ethnography of education" is a vehicle for the sweeping transformation of culture and society.

Action researchers have abandoned the methods of basic research as well as honesty with their cavalier attitude toward society in general and the people they study in particular. They see and hear only what they want to. Identifying themselves with the populism of Political Action Committees, they knowingly, even willfully commit the gravest mistake of classical ethnography--to exercise a bias toward the people they are investigating.

The abuse of ethnography for establishing special beliefs as Truth is now the main issue for the ethics of qualitative field studies. Social science researchers should not be committed to the establishment of beliefs. When qualitative investigations fail to uphold scientific

principles, the conclusions or implications are at least unsubstantiated and may be wrong. The consequences may be serious, even disastrous, for the people who are investigated.

Qualitative field study is, first and foremost, about human relationships. None is more important than the one between the researcher and the persons being studied. Ideally, respect for others, shown through honesty in all thoughts and deeds, predominates in it. To develop good relationships in field studies, the researcher must:

- Have a genuine interest in the people studied.
- Listen well.
- Ask questions revealing insight and interest in the situation at hand.
- Show respect for others' ideas and actions.
- Remember details about people, places, and events in the field study.
- Present an attractive personality and appearance.
- Give something of lasting value to the persons or groups studied.
- Keep accurate records of everything according to acknowledged criteria.
- Be honest about intentions and perceptions relevant to the field study.
- Exercise caution.
- Do no harm.
- Admit personal and professional weaknesses as well as the limitations of the study.

The qualitative field researcher must become a student whose best known, personal attributes are a child-like innocence, uncommon good manners, and a facile mind determined to know and understand other people and cultures. Hatred or discrimination are marks of bad character as well as bad research methodology. It is not only unscientific but also morally wrong to conduct research in order to promote a political agenda.

Ideally, the qualitative researcher tries to understand cultures as they really are, first in their own terms. Field studies of apparently

ordinary people are more urgently needed than those of strange and abnormal groups. Some contemporary ethnographers, concentrating on whatever seems exotic, repeat another mistake of classical ethnography. The concept of the deviant is useful for explaining some characteristics of some human groups as they come into contact with the larger society. But enough has been seen and done to explain these effects. Studies of purportedly deviant subcultures contribute little to our understanding the larger society, especially when the field researchers themselves either are members of the group studied or want to be. The culture of society, the superordinate whole, must be seen by ethnography without the blinders and self-fulfilling prophesies of ideology touted by fringe groups.

Ethnographers generally believe that the people they study are only vaguely aware of their own reality. The researchers try to know what no one else could know about the culture, because no one else has taken the time to study it. Or, the subjects of research--children, old people, minorities, the disadvantaged, ethnic groups, or "exotic" cultures--are not only unaware of their own society and culture, but even so simple, so innocent, so repressed, or so caught up in the drudgery of day-to-day living that they could not do any reflective thinking. Therefore--the reasoning goes--the dispossessed need enlightened ethnographers whose special knowledge and skills will reveal to them the real, heretofore unseen pattern of their lives, educate them in the true understanding of their culture, and lead them to the fullness of human being.

Ethnographers thus often presume that others are muddleheaded about their own lives and purposes. The outsider assumes that insiders are determined by a collective mind and particular physical and social conditions, largely incomprehensible to the insider. Thus know-it-all academicians like to think of abstract theory as intrinsically superior to the practical wisdom of local people in explaining that society. Examples of this aristocratic attitude are found not only among ethnographers, but also literary critics who assume they know better than the author what his book means and journalists who know better than coaches why they won or lost. But most average people have a

good sense of who they are and where they are headed--not to mention those who are especially intelligent, resourceful, and successful. They should be the key sources of information about a culture. Their emic perspective must be respected in order to be understood by the ethnographer. To assume vague awareness is a self-serving belief constructed by ethnographers to support their exercise of etic theory. To understand any way of life, ethnographers must know and have some respect for the insiders' perspective. Otherwise, they merely flatter themselves into thinking they inhabit a loftier plane of consciousness than their subjects.

The purpose for ethnography is to produce reports on human group behavior. Such work requires a sensitive person using the scientific method to systematically observe, record, and analyze the beliefs, knowledge, and activities that are highly valued and even considered sacred by a particular group of people. Ethnography listens to the language of local people to provide tentative but plausible explanations of the culture. Readers of ethnographic studies must remain free to judge the culture, applying their own standards of humanity.

Ethnography is not the touchstone of culture. Nor does it compare various cultures with each other to prove and disprove political and social theories. In qualitative field studies theory may serve simply to confirm the researcher's biases. Theory-driven ethnography is against humanity when it is based upon etic ideology and agendas for political action. Currently, the elites among action researchers have appointed themselves culture police enforcing particular cultures, damning some, and even destroying others. Since ethnography should never be done in the service of ideology or agency, we must examine critically the ideology and theory underpinning contemporary ethnography.

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Biographical Sketches

Curriculum Research and Evaluation is a firm that is devoted to research and development of programs in the field of education. CRE's specialities are: to provide services in order to evaluate the quality of education programs for private business and industrial companies, public and private funding agencies, and schools; and to develop and guide the implementation of curriculum and instruction.

Charles Bruckerhoff is Principal Evaluator and Research Associate for Curriculum Research and Evaluation. He received his doctorate from the University of Wisconsin. His research interests are curriculum theory and development, philosophy of education, effects of public policy on the classroom teacher, and school restructuring. He is the author of *Between Classes: Faculty Life at Truman High* and has written articles on curriculum development, qualitative research, urban collaboratives, and disadvantaged youth.

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